Chinese adult higher education as a heterotopia

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Abstract

Certain environments are 'outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (Foucault 1986, p.24). Foucault calls such places 'heterotopias' and offers six principles to help define them. Here we propose that Chinese adult higher education is a heterotopic space. Chinese adult higher education exists alongside regular higher education and has been used by the Chinese government to fulfil various social and political roles during different historical phases but different policy problematisation over time has shaped AHE into a crisis heterotopia. Thus, as a Foucauldian heterotopia, Chinese adult higher education exists as a space in the interstices of power relations and dominant social structures – a position that, in the Chinese credential society, leaves those who enter this space feeling marginalised. Further, we propose that as nations expand their higher education systems, this diversification needs purposeful follow-up otherwise certain branches of higher education will fall to the whim of socio-cultural change.

Key words: Foucault; heterotopia; China; adult higher education

Introduction

Many researchers describe the relationship between education and society as functionalist because they have assumptions that 'education should logically coordinate with the requirements of work because that is how societies function' (Saunders 2006, p.3). In this way, higher education is perceived as a space that contributes to the social, cultural, economic and political enrichment of the entire society, which implies that higher education should serve all society – sustaining, enriching, cultivating and critiquing the culture that underpins that society (McArthur

2011). McArthur (2011) points out that there is a general trend towards governments positioning higher education primarily in terms of its social, political and economic role; something that is here illustrated through discussion on adult higher education (AHE) in China.

Certain environments are 'outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (Foucault 1986, p.24). Foucault calls such places 'heterotopias' and offers six principles to help define them. This research claims that Chinese AHE functions as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986) in the Chinese credential society (Baker 2014), a situation that leaves its teachers and students to suffer from discrimination and marginalisation. Chinese AHE has been used by the government to fulfil various social and political roles during different historical phases and has had particular value at different historical phases such as the Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening up, and the Expansion of Higher Education (Liu 2008). However, in the current Chinese credential society, AHE is not valued by society and, particularly, it is not valued by employers. Currently, Chinese AHE is in a conflicting and problematic situation: the government encourages AHE to serve the construction of the lifelong-learning society, but no clear guidance is given to steer this development; plus an increasing number of AHE institutions are closing down (Liu 2018). Further, the Chinese government's Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (commonly referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative) has ushered in a new flow of capital, goods and services between China and the rest of the world; a flow that has the capacity to 'reconfigure global higher education' (Peters 2020, p.589). Therefore, it is significant to explore the situation of Chinese AHE in the current age and to examine conceptions of Chinese AHE - problematizing how AHE has been affected by social and economic changes in the era of higher education massification, and conceptualising how this might impact on higher education internationally.

Literature review

This section presents a review of key literature in relation to three areas: what Chinese

adult higher education is, how Chinese adult higher education is affected by the national development, and how this article understands heterotopia.

Chinese adult higher education

In the Chinese higher education landscape, RHE and AHE exist side-by-side as two parallel higher education systems (Liu 2008). The RHE system mainly targets 'traditional' students who enrol directly from high school and are recruited by universities through the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Gaokao). It offers full-time teaching and awards formal Bachelor degrees (Chen 2015). The AHE system targets working adults and the adults who enrol in AHE are generally limited to those who have failed or voluntarily declined to participate in the Gaokao (Yu 2010; Chen et al. 2017). Hence, AHE students are normally aged 18 or above. Chinese AHE has long been recognised as a means of upskilling the workforce (Lu 2014) and provides a space for both non-academic education and academic education at undergraduate level with AHE undergraduate degrees awarded (Li 2015; Qin 2016).

Adult higher education is offered by two groups of institutions (Chen et al. 2017). The first group is named 'AHE Independent Institutions' and includes the Open University, Radio and TV University; Management and Cadre Institutions; Independent Correspondence Institution, and the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China. The second group is made up of 'traditional' higher education institutions including universities and colleges that offer AHE as a distinct stream within the wider institution. The requirements to accepting and awarding AHE students is independent and distinct from that of the RHE system. Chinese Higher Education law states that adults (no matter their age, marital status, job etc.) have the right to participate in the Gaokao and be accepted by higher education institutions to study alongside younger 'traditional' students (Liu 2008). However, because of severe competition; the full-time study mode, and insufficient opportunities - as well as adults' job and family commitments - the part-time study format provided by the AHE system is more amenable to working adults (Liu 2018).

Chinese adult higher education and national development

The development of Chinese AHE is influenced by the nation's political, social and economic developments (Sun 2008). Sun claims that AHE has historically played various roles in serving the nation's goals and in resolving political, socioeconomic, and educational issues from its foundation in 1949 until the end of the century – during which period China has mobilised and experienced several social and political movements, and economic transformations. From the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 until the Cultural Revolution, Chinese AHE was initiated in 'three channels' to meet the immediate needs of economic construction: Worker's Spare Time University, Night/Evening Universities, and Correspondence Universities. During the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976), China underwent enormous political turmoil that significantly impacted every aspect of Chinese society (Sun 2008). The majority of AHE was shut down and the few that remained were used for political purposes in advocating class struggle (Dong 1990).

From 1978 until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Chinese government adopted a policy of opening up and economic reform, which catalysed China into a rapid process of transformation and modernisation. Starting in 1993, the Chinese government supported the reform of adult education and adult degree education was widely developed (Liu 2008). Adult higher education during these years gained a solid status and was developed to serve the nation's transforming economic and educational needs. Therefore, Chairman Deng Xiaoping stressed the restoration and development of education, particularly adult education for training and human resource development (Liu 2008), which was reflected the growing application of human capital theory.

> *Two Legs policy should again be applied to the development of higher education. Higher education institutions – including conventional colleges and universities – is one leg. Adult education institutions – including part-time, spare-time colleges, evening schools – is the other leg. For two legs are needed to walk.*
>
> (Deng 1994,

p.40)

During this period, the Central Office of the State Council issued a policy permitting ‘three equalities’, which meant that graduates from AHE institutions, correspondence universities and evening schools of RHE institutions should be treated equally; their degrees should be valued equally, and they should have equal opportunities for employment and promotion. This policy was significant in motivating people to participate in part-time adult education programmes.

China’s integration into the global economic system, and its increasingly active participation in the global market, created the impetus for further educational reforms in China. In response to large-scale lay-offs after the Asian financial crisis, China's central government attempted to stimulate the economy and alleviate the pressure on the labour market. China’s RHE and AHE provision then expanded rapidly from 1999 onward (Li, Whalley and Xing 2014). When the Asian economic crisis affected job opportunities, higher education became a particular type of space and higher education expansion was seen as a way to delay the entry of large numbers of youth into the labour market. The expansion of paid university places was also a way of get households to spend at a time when the economy needed financial stimulus (Postiglione 2011).

Since the massification of higher education, the number of enrolments has significantly increased. The Ministry of Education collects and reports all the educational information nationally and its figures show that, prior to massification, 12.6% of all higher education students were AHE students (287,043). Whereas, by 2018, 17.5% of all higher education students were AHE students (see Figure 1). Hence, AHE students have increasing potential to play an important role in the Chinese economy and society.

[Figure 1 near here]

In the year 1997, the total enrolment in RHE was 6.9 times that of AHE and this ratio changed to 5.7 by the year 2018. Even though RHE enrolment numbers have expanded dramatically over the last two decades, the ratio between the two systems has remained stable. However, despite the increasing number of AHE students over the last two decades, the number of AHE institutions (AHEI) has declines significantly whilst RHE institutions (RHEIs) have increased (see Figure 2).

[Figure 2 near here]

Massification led to a lowering of the requirements for entering RHE, allowing students who could not previously enrol to get such an opportunity - this changed the educational and social status of AHE and contributed to its marginalisation in the higher education landscape (Chen 2015). Further, since RHE was prioritized by both the government and universities, AHE received less attention and guidance, something which caused AHE to lose its developmental direction and quality (Yang 2016). In the era of higher education massification, AHE is in a dilemma – something that is doubly impacted in the credential society where specific qualifications from specific institutions are given preference by employers. Compared to AHE's reputation in the 1990s, Chinese AHE cannot now compete with RHE in providing high quality higher education, nor can it create a niche product that could enable its students to be competitive in the job market.

Apart from becoming less competitive, the developmental direction of AHE has become unclear. As a politically centralized state, educational policies and strategies of AHE are made by Chinese central government (Zhang and Zhang 1996). After 1999 the central government encouraged the general development of AHE in a few governmental documents but without operational guidance or investment (Liu 2018). In the year 2018, the central government claimed that AHE should contribute to the construction of the lifelong-learning society but, again, there was little investment or clear policy to guide this development (Liu 2019). Distinct from previous ages, in the era of higher education massification, it seems that the nation perceives that RHE has

satisfied the demand for higher education and AHE has not been assigned to a specific social or political duty, which places AHE 'on hold'.

As a socially-produced space, changes in policy and priority have left Chinese AHE in crisis. Whilst AHE has been presented as being central to the construction of social knowledge and fundamental to the exercise of national power, each era has presented a new national refocussing for AHE. Simultaneously, the lack of governmental guidance after the higher education expansion strategy has left uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the future of AHE. Chinese AHE has now become a marginal site of modernity. Foucault (1986) describes such 'other spaces' as places of contention that exist alongside the norm but function according to different rules. Foucault calls such places 'heterotopias' and offers six principles in order to help define them.

Understanding 'other spaces'

Foucault uses the concept of a heterotopia to show real spaces that exist within the real world but that are somehow separate from the wider society. Foucault describes heterotopias as, 'absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about' (Foucault 1986, p.24). In Foucault's analysis, heterotopias function in relation to their specific cultural, social and historical context. Unlike utopias, heterotopias may be actual locations - some of Foucault's examples include prisons, holiday camps, museums and psychiatric hospitals. In presenting the features of a heterotopia, Foucault (1986) offers points of departure in discussing the relationships between heterotopias and their societal context and offers six principles that define these 'other spaces': (1) they are reserved for those in crisis or deviance; (2) their function is affected by the unfolding of history; (3) they are made up of juxtaposing spaces; (4) they are linked to specific eras of time; (5) they are closed systems, and (6) they have a relationship with the wider society.

Heterotopias are 'distanced from mainstream realities' (Gosling 2014, p.44) but this 'distance' is more psychological than it is situational. Peters and Hume (2003) illustrate this through describing how the form and function of education has changed

over time but that current directions in education do not mean 'that heterotopic spaces disappear or that social control is diminished' (p.435). Instead we can see that the 'otherness' of heterotopic spaces is drawn from their usage (Johnson 2014). It is not the physical situation that creates a heterotopia, rather the network of relationships that determine how the social space of the heterotopia is constructed and experienced (Pattison 2015). Foucault (1980) felt that there had been a devaluing of space and later posited that 'we do not live inside a void…we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another' (1986, p.23). In Foucault's notion, the focus when considering a heterotopia should not be the space per se but the situational context that leads to a space becoming heterotopic (Saldanha 2008). China's two higher education formats – RHE and AHE – are contextually different; however, RHE casts a shadow over AHE. The mismatch of the two forms means that RHE does not entirely superimpose itself but that aspects of AHE remain visible. In this way AHE has come to be defined not by what it is in itself but by its 'otherness' from RHE.

A heterotopic perspective is one where the spaces of education are not purely functional but are drivers of identity and how we come to articulate this identity. For Foucault (1972, p.227) '[e]very educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it' and this power is also evident in other educational spaces. Sandberg et al. (2016) state that adult education in Sweden provides a temporary place in time, a heterotopia of deviation, allowing students to escape precarious employment. This Swedish example is akin to the Chinese economist, Min Tang's 'An Effective Way to Stimulate the Chinese Economy: Doubling the College Enrolment' and the Ministry of Education's 'Action Plan for Invigorating Education in the 21st Century' – documents that led to the expansion of higher education and that delayed entrance of many into the labour market (Liu and Wan 2019). However, in this instance, the notion of 'deviation' in Sweden is aligned with concepts of self-determination whereas in China this was a planned deviation from the norm in order to counter the Asian economic crisis. Other examples of adult higher education contexts as heterotopias include Blair's (2009) illustration of how further education in the UK fits Foucault's six principles to be a heterotopia – where it is argued that the rites and

rituals of such a space need to be problematized in relation to government educational initiatives and policies.

Gourlay (2015) applies the concept of heterotopia to open education and argues that this space might compensate for inadequacies or hostility within mainstream education – something that is mirrored in the tension between the conceptualisation of China's mainstream RHE and its AHE sector. Plooy (2018) also uses the principles of a heterotopia to examine the status of higher education in the South African context and claims that higher education is a heterotopically discursive space which offers the potential to take a new perspective on South African identities. China's higher education expansion strategy led to a loss of direction and a reduction in the quality of AHE (Yang 2016) and, as such, questions of identity can be raised in regard to the position of AHE graduates in a credential society. These previous research studies which employ Foucault's heterotopia as a theoretical tool to explore higher education help shed light on our analysis of Chinese AHE in the era of higher education massification.

Methodology

Against the aforementioned background and drawing on Foucault's (1986) notion of a heterotopia (which is seldom considered by scholars in the field of Chinese AHE) China's AHE can be seen as a space created through the negation of society's educational norms. In exploring this further, this research aims to examine Chinese AHE in the era of higher education massification; with a particular focus on to how the situation has been affected by social and economic changes in China. The central research question in this project is therefore: 'How do Chinese social and economic changes affect the situation and status of Chinese AHE?'

Two strands of enquiry were pursued:

1. Conceptual framing
2. Semi-structured participant interviews

The first strand of enquiry – conceptual framing – involved drawing together key trends and aligned literature to show how the development of Chinese AHE relates to Foucault's six principles of a heterotopia. Since Foucault's fourth principle is that heterotopias are linked to specific eras of time, this enquiry is framed by drawing together the aforementioned literature and debate. In doing this we highlight how Chinese AHE has become situationally heterotopic. We employed a methodology drawn from retrospective ethnography (Tilly 2007) where historico-sociological relationships are organised and analysed after the event in an effort to re-explore significant events through a new theoretical lens. Since its foundation in 1949, AHE has been defined and redefined in relation to social needs and has been used as a means of addressing emergent aspects of national need – thus it has been variously reshaped by political and sociological issues (Sun 2008). In trying to understand key themes in this reshaping, a conceptual framework was developed to relate literature; historico-social trends in AHE, and Foucault's six principles.

In the second strand of enquiry a 'bottom-up' approach was adopted to gain participant insight. In order to investigate this within a qualitative, phenomenological tradition, lecturers' and students' perspectives were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Detailed semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 lecturers and 15 students from two AHE institutions in China. One of these institutions was in a provincial capital city (PCC) and the other in a county-level city (CC). The reason for selecting AHE institutions from two different levels of city was to investigate if the situational characteristics of these places affected participants' opinions.

A 'snowball' technique where '[o]ne subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on' (Atkinson and Flint 2001, p.1) was employed to identify participants. Participation was voluntarily and participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage. The biographical information of participants is summarised in Table 1. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected their views before any further analysis took place. The data was then analysed through multiple readings of the transcripts in order to become familiar with the content, allowing common themes to emerge and

similarities and differences in responses to be identified.

[Table 1 near here]

The research approach sought to decipher subjective discourses leading to a clearer understanding of how Chinese social and economic changes have affected the development of the Chinese AHE, and the impact this has had on its students and lecturers. This approach is best suited to educational research due to the complexity of the topic (Seidman 2013), as the meanings participants attribute to social and economic issues are unique to the individual. This research allowed a degree of flexibility during interviews, to ensure that emergent themes could be followed up. This not only provided a degree of validity but also ensured that researcher subjective bias was reduced as it was each participant's discourse that largely defined the interview. An emergent data coding technique (Blair 2015) was adopted in order to establish key themes – this was guided by the data itself rather than having preconceived themes. This type of research requires the researcher to play an active role in the data collection and analysis (Spencer-Oatey 2004), meaning there are inherent strengths and weaknesses linked to the personal contact between the researcher and participants.

First strand of enquiry: Conceptual framing

In building a conceptual framework we used retrospective ethnography (Tilly 2007) to examine the historico-sociological development of Chinese AHE through the lens of the six heterotopic principles. Table 2 shows this conceptual framing.

[Table 2 near here]

Second strand of enquiry: Semi-structured participant interviews

During analysis of the semi-structured interviews three themes emerged from the data, which provided crucial insight into the current situation. The first theme relates to 'Historical invention'; the second theme covers 'Stratified higher education', and the third focuses on AHE as 'An isolated island in the sea'.

Historical invention

Participants were knowledgeable about the background to AHE and its current situation. They reported that in the early days of new China there was no systematic higher education but an enormous demand for talent. Twelve of the 15 lecturers (see Table 1) had been working in AHE for more than five years; seven of whom had been working in AHE for more than 10 years. These lecturers experienced many changes in AHE and were able to describe the current situation with a historical sense. In this situation, participants recognised, that AHE was launched and used to fulfil the nation's social and economic needs but due to development and changes in Chinese society, the specific function of AHE kept changing. The changing social function of AHE is illustrated in Mr Wang's words:

> *AHE was established soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China. It assisted RHE to cultivate talents in different historical stages when the opportunity to study in RHE was quite limited. After the Cultural Revolution, AHE was used for compensating the knowledge insufficiency of people whose study was suspended during the Cultural Revolution period. After the higher education massification took place in 1999, RHE expanded dramatically and had many tiers. Although it was still competitive to go to elite universities, it became quite easy for students to be recruited by the lowest tier of RHE as well as by the private universities. So AHE seems have lost its role in the Chinese higher education landscape. (age 47, PCC, working in AHE for 20 years)*

Mr Wang's statement reflects how AHE was established and re-established to fulfil the nation's political needs – leaving it an internally juxtaposing space (Foucault's third principle). There is evidence in Mr Wang's words that he felt AHE's function was affected over time, something that clearly links to Foucault's (1986) fourth and sixth principles. Foucault's fourth principle offers a vision of a space that is 'not oriented toward the eternal' (p.26) and this temporal nature is highlighted in the way that, for Mr Wang, AHE was initially a compensatory measure and then, after massification, never given a modern restoration so that it now seems out of time and out of place. The sixth heterotopic principle is that spaces have a relationship with the wider society and Foucault offers two versions of this principle – one where the heterotopia is designed as a perfect foil to the existing spaces and another where the heterotopia is 'space of illusion that exposes every real space,' (p.27). The vision that Mr Wang offers is certainly not 'laid out according to a meticulous plan' (p.27) rather, AHE sits to the side of RHE and, by doing so, has become a benchmark for measuring the worth of RHE. A comparable perspective can be found in some of the reflections of Mrs Zhang, a lecturer of another AHE institution, who similarly describes how AHE is linked to slices of time and suggests that its relationship to RHE means that it has not found a clear position in the new era:

> *The government gave AHE different tasks and goals in different historical stages previously. But after the higher education massification strategy was launched, it seemed like the RHE could fulfil the duty of providing higher education to the nation and the government gave little guidance or task to the AHE. This causes the AHE to not have a clear position in this new era or a definite development direction. It then becomes like not needed or abandoned. (age 44, CC, working in AHE for 15 years)*

As a heterotopia in the Chinese higher education landscape, AHE is supposed to have a 'precise and determined operation' (Foucault 1986, p.25) but in the era of higher education massification it seems have fulfilled its historical tasks and become a fragment of the past, something clearly demonstrated in the words of AHE student, Tian Li:

> *When people talk about AHE, it always seems like linked to 1970s to 1980s, very old-fashioned and out-of-date. In the era of higher education massification, the AHE fails to find out its characteristic development direction and unique feature in comparison to the RHE, but unfortunately puts itself in a discriminated and neglected situation. (age 27, PCC, second year student)*

Foucault points out that the unfolding of history 'can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion' (Foucault 1986, p.25) and Tian Li's words shows that AHE is perceived to be incompatible with the current era since it is seen as functioning in relation to a previous cultural and social context. The words of Mr Wang, Mrs Zhang, and Tian Li align with broader comments from Illsley and Waller (2017) who found that macro-societal changes in political ideologies and related policy initiatives can have an effect on the micro aspects of education. As such, this data suggests that Chinese AHE suffers from a set of complex and fundamental challenges in relation to its mission and purpose for existence.

Stratified higher education

The two forms of Chinese higher education (RHE and AHE) end up as stratified levels of higher education. Since all 15 AHE lecturers had contact with their RHE counterparts in their daily work, they were able to offer first-hand insight into the differences between the two strands. Thirteen of these 15 lecturers expressed that they had a clear sense of the inferiority of AHE system (the other two did not talk about this aspect). The seven lecturers who had been working in AHE for more than 10 years particularly emphasised that they have felt discriminated against. At the same time, all 15 AHE students interviewed in this research claimed they felt discriminated against since they had unsuccessful experiences in accessing RHE and felt negatively compared to their RHE counterparts in various aspects of daily life. One of the participants, lecturer Mr. Chen, was able to explain how the relationship between RHE and AHE has changed:

> *AHE was designed as a parallel form of higher education along*

with the RHE, just like the metaphor 'the other leg of higher education system' said by our former chairman, Deng Xiaoping. The difference between the two was supposed to be their goal and function but due to the decreasing quality of the AHE the difference between these two forms of education became the competitiveness and reputation. More attention is paid to the unsatisfactory reputation of AHE, which makes AHE a lower level of higher education, and makes both the AHE and its students discriminated in society. (age 38, CC, working in AHE for 5 years)

For Mr. Chen, Chinese AHE operates in a 'parallel' space, something Hetherington (1997) describes as 'othering' – a situation that is 'established through a relationship of difference within other sites' (p.8). Apart from being an 'other space' in the Chinese higher education landscape, AHE is also a heterotopia of crisis and deviation (Foucault's first principle) since, in a complex juxtaposition, this 'other' format serves a select group of students who have often 'failed' or 'been failed' by previous educational experiences. There is a clear link between AHE and the wider society and Mr. Chen highlights a vicious circle where AHE is viewed, in the local context, as 'unsatisfactory'. This, in turn, creates a condition where resources are channelled towards RHE – thus exacerbating the situation. A heterotopia is affected by the culture in which it occurs (Foucault's second principle) and, in a culture of discrimination, societal perceptions of those who graduate from AHE declines as the perceived status of AHE declines. This point is further highlighted in the remarks of Mr. Li, a lecturer of an AHE institution:

I think the society may perceive AHE as the place where the incapable students will go. Since studying in private university, the lowest tier of RHE system, is nowadays only a matter of paying tuition fee, the society would see [AHE] students as those who are incapable to be recruited even by private universities. Although we provide higher education at degree level, the society perceive the higher education we provide as informal, so AHE is placed at the bottom layer of the entire Chinese higher education system. (age 36,

PCC, working in AHE for 3 years)

Foucault suggests that heterotopias have their own rules, culture and context and that such spaces can take different forms. By placing AHE 'at the bottom layer' it becomes a crisis heterotopia; only suitable for those in desperate need. The crisis heterotopia is 'reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis' (Foucault's first principle: Foucault, 1986, p.24). If an individual has no choice (because of their family or financial situation) then AHE becomes their only option. Chinese adult higher education has become tarnished by societal judgement meaning that it becomes a non-choice for many and the only choice for desperate others.

The massification of higher education has led to a situation where basic jobs now require a degree and this has placed those who cannot get into RHE into a state of crisis. All 15 AHE students reported that they had failed the Gaokao, so they missed the opportunity to study in RHE. Eleven of the participants said they came to study in AHE because they felt there was a risk that, without further education, they would be replaced by RHE graduates in the near future. Four AHE students claimed they were required by their managers to get a higher qualification (higher than their previous vocational college qualification) otherwise their jobs could be in danger. Student Li Ma further emphasised issues in this regard and was able to express a personal 'crisis' – whereby her attendance at AHE was a result of her work only allowing for part-time study (something outside the culture of higher education where full-time study is the norm):

> *I admit that going to university and study in higher education is much easier than before since entry score of the lowest tier of public universities and of private universities is quite low. I believe this is the reason that the society would perceive us as the least capable students. But to my knowledge the public university and the private university do not provide part-time programmes to working adults. So, for me, studying in RHE is not only about a person's capability, it is also concerning the possibility and availability. Studying in AHE is the only available way for working adults to get*

> *higher education. It is RHE that excludes us structurally and symmetrically, not our capability. (age 26, PCC, first year student)*

In the opinions expressed by both Mr. Li and Li Ma we are able to see that AHE in China seems to satisfy Foucault's first principle to constitute a heterotopia in that it is both a heterotopia of crisis and of deviation. There is also evidence in the participant perspectives that AHE meets Foucault's second and sixth principles in that the role and significance of AHE is affected by historico-sociological biases and by its relationship with the wider society. In terms of a heterotopia of crisis, the students entering AHE in China are often at points of change in their life: failing the Gaokao and rejected by RHE (Chen et al. 2017); needing the AHE degree for career purposes (Chen 2015); or changing careers within their subject specialism (Liu 2018). As a heterotopia of deviance, AHE is normally perceived as an 'other space' in comparison to the RHE and RHE is seen as the authentic and reputable pathway (Chen et al. 2017). This 'otherness' is also expressed statistically where far fewer students enter AHE than enter RHE, for example, in the year 2018, 1,400,380 students entering AHE whilst 4,221,590 entered RHE (Ministry of Education 2018).

An isolated island in the sea

Eleven of the 15 lecturers stated they could sense the isolated situation of AHE (the other four did not talk about this aspect); further to this, all 15 AHE students claimed that they were not only aware of the isolated situation of AHE but also their own isolated situation in wider society. Foucault fifth principle examines the notion that a heterotopia may appear 'open', but 'in fact that is only an illusion' (Foucault 1986, p.26). Mrs Guan, a lecturer from an AHE institution, gives her perspective on this closed system and its interaction with external places:

> *In China, AHE is quite a closed system. On one hand, it does not interact with RHE institutions; on the other hand, each individual AHE institution does not interact with each other as well. Our AHE institution just plays by itself. The lack of interaction with the outside world, particularly its counterparts, constrains its*

improvement or development. AHE just like an isolated island in the sea. (age 40, PCC, working in AHE for 10 years)

Foucault's sixth principle of a heterotopia concerns the relationship between the 'other space' and society at large. Foucault suggests that heterotopias 'have a function in relation to all the space that remains' (1986, p.27). Mrs Guan describes AHE as 'an isolated island in the sea' and this helps demonstrate how AHE sits apart from the space that remains around it. In this way, AHE forms a 'space of illusion' (Foucault, 1986, p. 27) where its low status actually appears to increase the prestige of RHE (irrespective of the empirical status of RHE). Thus, the imbalanced relationship of these two spaces is magnified by proximity. The lecturer, Mr Tong, gives a more detailed explanation about the isolated and marginalised situation of the Chinese AHE and shows how the initial imbalance between AHE and RHE is further exaggerated when they come into close contact:

AHE suffers from discrimination, neglect and a bad reputation among the society. Due to the higher education massification, many universities cannot cope with the expanded number of students. So they merge with AHE institutions and reorganise AHE but they appropriate these AHE institutions' resources to serve their RHE students. At the same time, they also take AHE as a way to earn tuition fees and this money is mainly invested to their RHE students. Unfortunately, these universities have not spent any effort on developing the AHE sector, which contributes to the worsening of AHE's quality and reputation. University merger generates linkage between universities, the RHE institutions and the AHE institutions, but this linkage drags down the quality of AHE and deteriorates its marginalised situation. (age 45, CC, working in AHE for 10 years)

In September 2002, the State Council issued the 'Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Reforming and Developing Vocational Education', which encouraged AHE institutions to transform to higher vocational colleges or combine with RHE institutions in order to provide better education. In the year 2015, the Department of Vocational Education and Adult Education, issued a document which suggested AHE

institutions should seek help from, or cooperate with, RHE institutions, in order to offer satisfactory education to working adults from various professions. These two governmental documents along with other governmental documents laid the groundwork for the amalgamation of RHE and AHE institutions. However, Mr Tong shows that from the perspective of AHE institutions, the AHE institutions that merged with RHE institutions still felt marginalised.

For Foucault (1986, p.25), a heterotopia 'is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'. He offers the image of a formal garden with many 'contradictory' sites coming together into one space. This third principle is evident in Mr. Tong's description where AHE appears to be made of various spaces and what is described as a 'merger' or 'linkage' is actually the juxtaposition of 'a whole series of places that are foreign to one another' (p.25). Foucault's fifth principle for a heterotopia states that 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (Foucault 1986, p.26). These are both physical and ideological inclusions and exclusions and often relate to concerns about belonging and legitimacy. Foucault (1986) suggests that heterotopias 'have a function in relation to all the space that remains' (p.27). We see this in the realm of AHE as there is a clear link between AHE and the wider society, but, due to its decreasing quality and perceived value, AHE finds it hard to educate the workforce or to offer courses that encourage personal growth.

As well as the lecturers interviewed in this research, AHE students also gave their perceptions about how the AHE exists as marginalised space in both the Chinese higher education landscape and in wider society. Further examples of the marginalisation of AHE come from AHE student Fang Fang:

> *My mum also studied in AHE and got her AHE undergraduate degree. In her generation, AHE degrees were relatively competitive in the job market and accepted by many professions. But in my generation, since the amount of people with undergraduate degree or above is massive, the majority of employers only recruit people with RHE degrees and we are excluded from many job*

opportunities. (age 27, PCC, second year student)

Similarly, AHE student, Meng Zhu, talked about AHE's position in the job market:

> *I got a job by my AHE undergraduate degree. I think if the employers assume their job positions cannot attract people with RHE degrees they would recruit people with AHE degrees. Otherwise they will definitely employ RHE graduates who are these employers' priority. So, we are just like second-class labour but we are still more competitive than those with no degrees. (age 40, CC, final year student)*

Fang Fang and Meng Zhu show how China's credential society has reduced the perceived value of AHE and, in the era of higher education massification, AHE is clearly seen as the poor alternative to RHE. Foucault's sixth heterotopic principle determines that heterotopias function in relation to all other space and the words of these two students show a clear imbalance in the relationship between two spaces. It will suffice for now to quote Foucault (1972) on education, when he reports that 'every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it' (p.227).

Discussion

The data presented here gives detailed insight into how Chinese social and economic changes affect the situation and status of Chinese AHE. The data illustrates that AHE was established and re-established to fulfil various tasks during different historical phases, but in the era of higher education massification, when the opportunity to study in RHE has become abundant, the role of AHE has become reduced in status. Foucault (1972, p.227) asks, '[w]hat is an educational system, after all, if not a ritualisation of the word; if not a qualification of some fixing of roles?' Our conceptual framing of the historico-sociological development of Chinese AHE through the lens of the six heterotopic principles (see Table 2) offers some

illumination in this area. This framing ritualises the words of key authors to show the deliberate framing and reframing of AHE against the backdrop of China's changing political, social and economic situation. The second strand of our research, the semi-structured participant interviews, adds further clarification regarding how these social and economic changes were felt to affect the situation and status of Chinese AHE in the era of massification. Participant comments from the interviews are broadly aligned, showing no difference between the perspectives of those in capital cities and those in county-cities. These comments falls into three themes. The first theme, 'Historical invention', shows clear evidence of Foucault's fourth and sixth heterotopic principles. The second theme, 'Stratified higher education', aligns to the first, second and sixth principle. And the third theme, 'An isolated island in the sea' shows evidence of participant perspectives in relation to the third, fifth and sixth principle.

Since the expansion of higher education, AHE has descended to the bottom layer. Both AHE itself and AHE students suffer from discrimination and a negative reputation. The ideals of the 'Two Legs' policy (Deng 1994) have changed and AHE has found itself in an unequal situation. More specifically, AHE has become a neglected, marginalised and discriminated space in the higher education system and in wider society. The different policy problematisations over time have shaped AHE into a crisis heterotopia, both in capital cities and county-cities. Our results show that Chinese AHE exists as a space in the interstices of power relations and dominant social structures (Foucault 1986) and fits Foucault's six principles to be a heterotopia.

Foucault's reflects that 'space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (Rabinow 1984, p.252) and that spaces are socially constructed and are impacted by changing social relations. The heterotopic situation of Chinese AHE is undoubtedly socially produced and affected by the nation's social and economic changes. The transformation of Chinese higher education from elite education to mass education forced AHE to function as an 'other space' and this space is not currently esteemed. Considered through the lens of Foucault's concept of a heterotopia, it appeared that AHE is a site of potential conflict, contested by those within and/or outside its borders (Brookfield 2019).

Conclusion

China has made significant progress toward educational and economic affluence over the past half-century. Chinese culture underwent a spectrum of radical social changes, resulting in the dual/stratified higher education system due to the political prioritization of educational massification in the service of economic modernization (Deng 2016). Chinese AHE has become a heterotopia through this process – it has been shaped by the history and politics of various periods; linked to social and cultural contexts at each slice in time, and it has now been pushed to a position of deviance. Foucault's (1986) principle concern in problematizing heterotopias was in examining how one space relates to another such that a specific site can 'contradict' other sites 'in such a ways as to suspect, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (p.24). It appears that Chinese AHE is the 'counteraction' to the space occupied by RHE. In this way, the thing that is presumed to be of substance is RHE and AHE is its heterotopic counter. The current status of Chinese AHE as a heterotopia left isolated in the sector, affects its teachers and students negatively, weakens its students' achievements, and marginalises its graduates in the workforce – something of particular concern within credential societies that value one specific outcome over another (Baker 2014).

For Foucault (1980) exploring the limits of a space is a means of examining the power relationship between a particular place and its wider environment, and this research is significant for the wider environment of higher education. Here we claim that Chinese AHE is a heterotopia, but our findings are also significant in regard to the broader higher education context. 'The axis of higher education is shifting toward China' (Peters 2020, p.589); therefore, gaining an understanding of the orientation of Chinese higher education becomes important for the international community. Chinese adult higher education exists as a space in the interstices of power relations and dominant social structures and, as such, can offer insight into how other spaces found in such contexts may fare. Using Foucault's heterotopia as a theoretical tool allows us to understand the forces that have helped develop Chinese higher education and may give us a small glimpse of the future. The new developmental targets of Chinese higher education include constructing world-class universities and enhancing

academic cooperation and communication with Belt and Road countries.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative and through internationalisation, higher education in China has now become a pivotal matter for the modern world and, as such, our results should be seen as a cautionary tale. Higher education is a space that contributes to the social, cultural, economic and political enrichment of society (McArthur 2011); however, its form also changes according to the needs of the society around it. In many nations, higher education has become diversified. This development is driven by local needs and by international pressures. Thus, treating Chinese AHE as a heterotopia is a means of opening up the current framing of educational thought and reassessing our conception of what higher education is and what higher education might be. As nations expand their higher education systems, they need to be mindful of the implications of various policies, priorities and pressures, otherwise certain branches of higher education will fall to the whim of socio-cultural change. The decline of AHE is a valuable lesson that governments need to keep a check on the situatedness of 'other' educational systems – whether these systems are indigenous or imported.

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